

VZCZCXRO7293
OO RUEHCI
DE RUEHKA #0514/01 1281141
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 071141Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6738
INFO RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 8435
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2163
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 9671
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0637
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 1285
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000514

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/PB AND SCA/FO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/06/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [MARR](#) [EAID](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: BANGLADESH ARMY CHIEF: ELECTIONS BY DECEMBER 2008

REF: DHAKA 499

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary
=====

¶1. (C) Chief of Army Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed and the Ambassador discussed the progress of efforts to promote democracy, development, and denial of space to terrorism in their introductory meeting May 6. Moeen pledged continued cooperation in fighting terrorism, focusing on the need to reform madrassa education. The Army Chief also expressed appreciation for the prompt and effective U.S. assistance following November 2007's Cyclone Sidr. Moeen emphasized that neither he nor the Army desire a political role and pledged that elections would be held before the end of December 2008. He said that the Chief Adviser would soon lay out the path towards elections, including a further relaxation of the ban on political activities. The Ambassador urged that the State of Emergency provisions be lifted prior to the elections and emphasized the need for the political parties to buy into the Caretaker Government's reform agenda. Moeen's message tracked closely with that given to the Ambassador by the Chief Adviser days earlier.

Getting to Know You
=====

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Defense Attache and Pol/Econ Counselor (notetaker), called on Chief of Army Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed May 6. Thanking the Army Chief for agreeing to meet with him on short notice, the Ambassador emphasized the importance of the upcoming visits to Bangladesh by SCA A/S Boucher and S/CT Coordinator Dailey. The Ambassador explained that these visits would provide an opportunity for discussions of the "3 D's" of our bilateral relationship: democracy, development, and denial of space to terrorists. Moeen welcomed the visits and the opportunity to meet with these senior USG officials. He expressed appreciation for the outstanding support the USG had provided to the Caretaker Government (CTG) over the past 16 months. The Ambassador acknowledged the important support the Bangladesh Army had provided to the CTG during the response to Cyclone Sidr and the voter registration drive.

Committed to Fighting Terrorism; Concerned about Madrassas
=====

¶3. (C) Moeen assured the Ambassador Bangladesh was fully committed to partnering with the U.S. in fighting terrorism, a threat that knew no boundaries. Bangladesh welcomed U.S. assistance in equipping counter terrorism units, and in providing necessary intelligence. Moeen said the previous

government had erred by not keeping a close enough eye on Bangladeshis returning from jihad abroad. The August 2005 bombings had been a wakeup call for the government. Moeen and the Ambassador agreed upon the need to keep a close eye on Bangladeshis who might be tempted to commit acts of terror at home and abroad. For the Army Chief, it was important to reform Madrassa education to provide appropriate skills to graduates to prevent them from becoming terrorists. The Ambassador noted our efforts to teach English to madrassa students and said we would look at other ways to be of assistance.

Operation Sea Angel II Solidified Relationship =====

¶4. (C) Moeen told the Ambassador that all Bangladeshis, in particular members of the armed forces, deeply appreciated the role that the U.S. played in responding to Cyclone Sidr in November 2007. During the relief operations, American and Bangladeshi troops worked together "shoulder to shoulder" and as a result of their actions, not a single person died from lack of food or water. Moeen said he had written to PACOM Commander Admiral Keating expressing Bangladesh's thanks for the U.S. assistance following the cyclone, and asked that this message also be conveyed to others in the USG.

Army Wants Elections By the End of 2008 =====

¶5. (C) Moeen confided that the Bangladesh Army had not wanted to intervene in the political turmoil that rocked the

DHAKA 00000514 002.2 OF 003

country in later 2006. After President Iajuddin declared a State of Emergency on January 11, the new CTG fixed a clear mission--free, fair, and credible elections leading to a transfer of power to an elected government. The CTG has not deviated from that mission. At the same time, this required reforms to eliminate the role of money and muscle in politics.

¶6. (C) The Army had not shown any indication of assuming a political role, Moeen stated, and he himself had no interest in becoming President. Instead, the Army had been focused on providing support to the CTG and Election Commission as it embarked upon an ambitious voter registration program. The data collection for the photo voter list was 81 percent completed and should be finished by June. This would allow the list to be completed by August, ahead of schedule despite hurdles faced early in the process when necessary equipment arrived late. Bangladesh would have one of the largest photo voter lists in the world once it was completed.

¶7. (C) Moeen emphasized that the CT and EC "had drawn a line" that elections would take place by December 31, 2008. He told the Ambassador that "under no circumstances will that line be crossed." Elections required the support of the Government, the Election Commission, the people of Bangladesh, and the political parties. Moeen stressed that his principal concern was the failure of the parties to reform. He asked rhetorically why the parties had not suspended the 54 politicians already convicted by lower courts on corruption charges.

Political Parties Need to Reform =====

¶8. (C) Moeen stated unequivocally that the Army was not a political party, its leaders were not political leaders, and its goal was simply to create a level playing field for the elections. The Army was prepared to work with any party that came to power through the elections, and it would not demonstrate a preference among the contenders. Moeen confirmed the Army would not participate in the upcoming political dialogue, despite calls from many quarters for it to do so. That was the job of the civilian Advisers.

¶9. (C) The Ambassador noted that many of the CTG's reforms were popular among the people, and this provided leverage over the parties. Also, the parties had to understand their need to reform. At the same time, the CTG needed the parties to "buy-in" to the process. Reform of the parties would take time, but it was possible, if the government appealed to the parties' own interests.

¶10. (C) Moeen explained that he had met with business leaders earlier in the day and had encouraged them to put pressure on the parties to accept reforms to the political system. Bangladesh could not return to a pre-1/11 situation. The Ambassador emphasized the corrosive impact of corruption in building democracy, promoting development, and fighting terrorism. It was important to create a "virtuous cycle" rejecting corruption; there was no reason why this could not take place in Bangladesh.

¶11. (C) Moeen said Bangladesh had learned from its neighbors and did not want to follow their examples, adding that the Army had not insinuated itself into outside institutions. Personally, Moeen said, he did not even visit offices of civilian ministries, in order to avoid the perception he was interfering. Moeen said that the Army had not taken over in the past 16 months and would not do so in the remaining 8 months before elections.

¶12. (C) The Ambassador stressed the importance of lifting the State of Emergency, in part to avoid giving the party that loses the election a ready-made excuse for contesting the fairness of the process. Moeen accepted the point, noting that the Chief Adviser would soon address the nation and announce plans for a gradual relaxation of the state of emergency rules, beginning with lifting the ban on "indoor politics" outside of Dhaka city. Other provisions of the emergency laws would gradually be lifted as the elections approached. At the same time, the CTG would not accept the situation deteriorating into anarchy.

Comment
=====

DHAKA 00000514 003 OF 003

¶13. (C) Moeen cleared his schedule to meet with the Ambassador, and is doing the same to meet with A/S Boucher and Coordinator Dailey, in order to convey his vision of the Army's role during the CTG's tenure. Moeen was focused during the meeting and laid out a clear vision for the future. His declaration that "a line had been drawn" for elections by the end of 2008 was the most categorical he had ever been with us in stating that elections would take place according to the roadmap. It also matches what the Chief Adviser told the Ambassador. At the same time, Moeen is wary about the political parties' behavior. He was clear that the CTG would have to re-evaluate the roadmap if the parties attempt to plunge the country into chaos in the coming months. That said, at this point, we need to take the GOB officials at their word and begin preparations in earnest to support Bangladesh's attempt to hold free, fair, and credible elections. Progress on all three "D's" hinges on these polls.
Moriarty